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Weekly Summary

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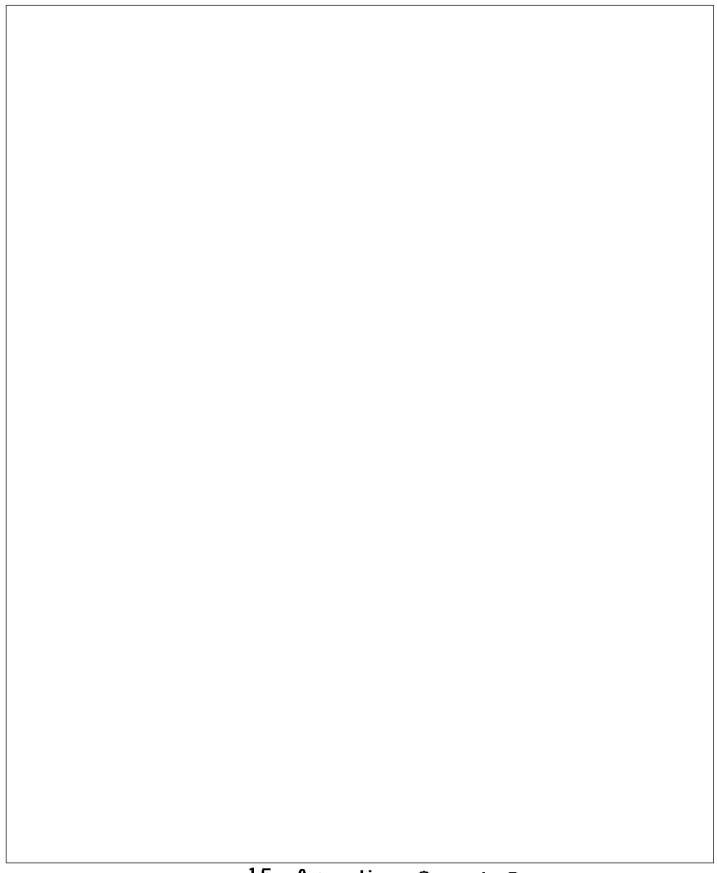

The WEEKLY SUMMARY, issued every Friday morning by the Office of Current Intelligence, reports and analyzes significant developments of the week through noon on Thursday. It frequently includes material coordinated with or prepared by the Office of Economic Research, the Office of Strategic Research, the Office of Geographic and Cartographic Research, and the Directorate of Science and Technology.

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15 Argentina: Coup in Perspective

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Comments and queries on the contents of this publication are welcome. They may be directed to the editor of the Weekly Summary,

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ARGENTINA: COUP IN PERSPECTIVE

Everything Argentina's military junta has said and done indicates careful advance preparation and an eye for public relations. The officers handled the actual take-over skillfully, and they have since worked to maximize public acceptance while making the sweeping changes they view necessary.

The new military leaders are utilizing the temporary political calm between Peron's departure and the start of their own policy initiatives to project an image of moderation and build popular support. Public relief with the ouster of the chaotic Peron government, combined with the junta's campaign to attract sympathy, has created a honeymoon period during which shortcomings are being overlooked.

Emphasis on Conciliation

The officers' public statements emphasize the need for conciliation while eschewing vengeance and totalitarian designs. The junta very quickly eased the press censorship it had imposed, removed roadblocks, and reduced the prominence of armed troops, all in an effort to restore normalcy. Moreover, the junta has replaced an interim, all-military cabinet with a permanent one featuring two civilian ministers. The government has also imposed a token price decrease on certain consumer staples.

The coup itself was the culmination of a process that began long ago and benefitted from near-unanimity of opinion among the military and from general public acquiescence. In full view of everyone, the armed forces for many months planned the details of how they would overthrow Maria Estela Peron. The former government was powerless to check the officers, who viewed each new misstep by the inept Peron as one more in a long list of reasons justifying her ouster. By delaying as long as they did, the armed forces hoped to give the administration every possible chance either to reform or completely discredit itself. Judging by the lack of resistance and some laudatory press comment following the coup, the military succeeded in the latter objective.

The take-over was accompanied by articulate but relatively brief statements of its justification and aims. The proclamation of the coup concentrated on the "exhaustion" of all constitutional measures, a clear reference to repeated failures by civilians—notably congress—to remove Peron or at least curtail her authority. The proclamation appealed to Argentines' weariness of violence, noting that the civilians' inability to solve basic problems only "increased extremism of all sorts."

Revitalizing Constitutional Institutions

In its list of "basic objectives," the junta sought to play down its obvious national security concerns. It gave top billing to "revitalizing" constitutional institutions by placing the national interest above all particular interests. The new government placed the enforcement of "Christian morality" second, and only then listed eradication of subversion. The intent here was clearly to demonstrate that the junta has all-encompassing goals and that the terrorists do not have the power to monopolize the government's attention. The coup leaders may intend this message as much for their hard-line colleagues and subordinates as for the general population.

In a related public relations effort, the junta distributed information packets to foreign military attaches containing a statement of the "philosophy" of the military revolt and a biography of President Videla. Both are long, detailed statements designed to place the take-over in the best possible light. Videla is described as an outstanding career army officer, but more important, he is painted as a man uniquely able to bridge individual interests and take a global view of important problems.

Junta Institutionalizing Its Rule

The officers have already begun to institutionalize their rule. Though they collectively have sweeping powers, they have set up a system

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Agosti

Videla

Massera AP

that seeks to minimize the influence of any one man, while striving for consensus. The three-man junta, composed of Videla, navy chief Admiral Emilio Massera and air force chief General Agosti, appoints the president but retains supreme authority. The President is to work closely with a nine-man legislative council composed of senior officers of the three services. The council will serve to communicate the views of the armed forces to the junta and the President and is to have a strong voice in the promulgation of laws. At least initially, the net effect seems to be a diffusion of authority and the representation of numerous points of view.

The fact remains, nonetheless, that an unelected military regime once again controls Argentina and will soon be judged on its record. To ensure control, the junta has replaced virtually all officials at the national and regional levels with military men. Congress has been disbanded, all political activity has been suspended, and major labor organizations have been placed under government control. A few splinter parties have been banned outright. A state of siege is in effect, and perpetrators of violence can be shot on sight. Stiff jail terms or the death penalty are to be meted out by military courts to those who seek to cripple public services.

The officers are stressing their intention to retain an evenhanded stance by avoiding extreme repression, but problems in several areas could quickly put their equanimity to the test. Also, there is by no means complete unanimity within the military behind the idea of moderation. The virulent terrorist movement has already sought to provoke the junta by renewing its violent campaign. The terrorist rampage, possible civilian opposition from the ousted Peronists, or early economic reverses could reinforce the arguments of those officers who advocate more stringent measures. Indeed, the very ease with which the military came to power could make even slight setbacks in any area extremely difficult to explain away.

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